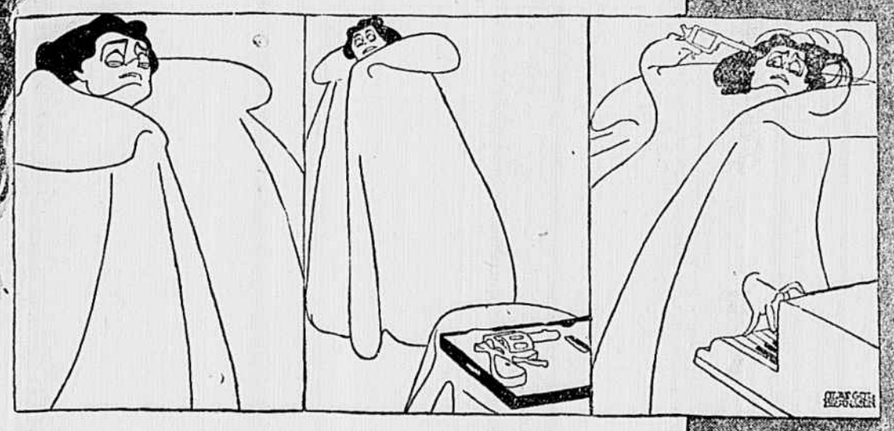
The Last Sad Page of Sorrowful Duse's Own Love Tragedy

"Vamped" by d'Annunzio of All Her Spiritual Strength, Her Decline Begun When He Turned Her Devotion Into Phrases for a Book, the Only Rival of Bernhardt Enters Into Her Final Stage of Poverty



Eleonora Duse. Here in This Pose of the Great Tragedienne Can Be Seen in Her Wistful, Brooding Profile—Indeed, in Her Whole Attitude—the Profound Emotionalism Which Once Aroused, as It Was by the Poet d'Annunzio, Could Not Be Restrained by Any Effort of Will and Left Her at Last a Spiritual and Financial Bankrupt.

ELEONORA DUSE'S life of tragic suffering, unhappy love and artistic triumph is entering upon its saddest chapter.

She who has drawn crowded houses of thrilled admirers on two hemispheres is now a poverty-stricken, prematurely-broken woman—broken in body and broken in spirit. Through unfortunate investments and inevitable war conditions her large fortune has been dissipated. One calamity after another has fallen upon her and now she is reduced to misery. She has been forced to apply for the small pension that is believed to be due her as the widow of an officer, although long parted from her husband.

Saddest of all in Duse's own eyes is the fact that she has been forced to abandon her great dream of recent years—the creation of a home for traveling actresses, where they could escape some of the miseries and humiliations she experienced in youth.

Italy regards Duse as the greatest actress in the world. France considers her "almost the equal of Bernhardt." The rest of the world is perhaps equally divided as to their talents. In her old age Sarah Bernhardt is enjoying a happy and prosperous life. Duse, who is much younger, seems to have fallen into utter misery after many wonderful triumphs.

What is the reason of the tragic downfall of Eleonora Duse, her successive misfortunes, her broken spirit, her failure to rally in spite of all the opportunities that must still lie within her grasp? Many who know and admire her say that the secret of her tragedy lies in her intimate association with Gabriele d'Annunzio, the brilliant decadent poet and playwright, who has lately disturbed Europe and defied his native Italy by his occupation of Fiume.

Those who remember well the lives of Duse and d'Annunzio say that from the time she first became infatuated with the poet she steadily lost her strength, her vitality and her hope of the future. It was as though a spiritual vampire had stolen away her forces. They say that the poet has had a similar influence on the many women with whom he has been associated—on all, perhaps, except the virile and statuesque Ida Rubinstein.

A good many years ago when d'Annunzio, the author of "The Triumph of Death," was at the height of his literary fame, he met Eleonora Duse, whose graceful but rather melancholy beauty had charmed thousands. She became completely fascinated with the wonderfully talented poet and playwright and utterly devoted to him.

For her he wrote his most brilliant plays, including "The Dead City" and "The Gioconda," two masterpieces of morbidity and strange sin that have never been equalled. D'Annunzio showed a great appreciation of one of Duse's chief beauties—her hands. His "Gioconda" was dedicated "To Eleonora Duse of the beautiful hands," and in the play the heroine allowed her hands to be crushed into shapelessness as a supreme sacrifice to her lover. In her series of d'Annunzio plays Duse increased her fame, although their morbidity must have reacted deeply on her already melancholy temperament. But for a time, undoubtedly, she lived in a kind of exotic Paradise with her gifted poet.

Then he callously dealt her a blow that hurt her inexpressibly. He published a new novel called "Fuoco" (Fire), in which he revealed the story of her early life, as she had told it to him in moments of affectionate confidence. She had been thrown upon her own resources as a child and had made her living as a strolling actress.

During this period she suffered the cruelest hardships and degradations. All the story of these experiences, revealed to d'Annunzio in confidence, he published with the utmost fullness, even to the most intimate details. To Eleonora Duse, who shrunk from publicity as no actress has ever done, the shock was terrible. Her health was shattered and her reason was endangered for a time.

Her spirit never entirely recovered from this blow, and although she enjoyed many new successes her strength gradually left her. On the other hand, d'Annunzio regarded the parting from Duse as calmly as any of the other vicissitudes of his varied career.

Soon afterward he became devoted to a woman of an entirely different type—the vigorous and picturesque Russian dancer, Ida Rubinstein, who created the roles of the martyr St. Sebastian and the "Pisanella" in his new plays.

D'Annunzio, it is said, would have worn out Ida Rubinstein by his exactions, by tyrannies, his caprices and his vampirish behavior, but she was too strong to succumb to his influence. She would not permit her will to be absorbed in his. When his moods became oppressive to her, she dismissed him. They had in fact parted before the outbreak of the war when he returned to fight in Italy, where he was wounded. Then, touched by a heroism which she had perhaps not suspected in the exquisite poet, she hastened to Italy and nursed him.

In the meantime Eleonora Duse was approaching the last act of her tragedy. War distress nearly put an end to theatrical enterprises. She was living in her beautiful villa upon a cypress-wooded hill outside the Nomentana Gate of Rome. This she intended to turn into a hostelry for travelling actresses, one of a chain which she hoped to establish throughout Italy. Then one misfortune after another fell upon her, until she is now said to be practically a pauper.

What is there in the character of the poet-playwright-warrior d'Annunzio that causes such disastrous consequences to the mind, fortunes, health and happiness of women who experience his fascinations? This magazine applied for scientific enlightenment concerning d'Annunzio's character to the distinguished psychologist and philosopher, Professor Charles Gray Shaw, who holds the chair of philosophy in New York University. In reply Professor Shaw furnished this interesting analysis of one who is perhaps the strangest and most fascinating figure in Europe to-day:

"Once a lover of womanhood, d'Annunzio is now a lover of land, and it is with a devouring passion that he regards his new mistress. Once, twice, if the heart records his passions, he has been in love; at last a supreme passion has invaded his weary breast. As d'Annunzio loved Eleonora Duse, so he loves Italia Irredenta; and just as Ida Rubinstein danced with naked feet in his brain, so pirouettes his beloved Fiume.

"A glance at the strange-looking head of the poet is sufficient for the physiognomist to observe how the artist's soul-stuff has arranged itself. Through the visible skull one can see the place of thought and beauty, for his brow is a temple of intellectualism. But the weakness of the mouth and chin fails to suggest any mite of that extreme energism which of late has been the guiding genius of the quondam aesthete and lover. Those sensuous eyes are adapted to pleasant, entrancing scenes such as the poet beheld in the boudoir of his beloved, but there is no place behind those heavy eyelids for the strident, angular spectacles of war.

"It is true that there is something Satanic in the little beard which adorns the weak chin of the poet, but in place of horned tufts of hair on the brow one sees only the placidity of baldness. The ears have been open to the murmur of brooks and women's voices, to the sighing of winds and notes of bel canto, but they seem to betray no capacity for the harsher music of shell and machine-gun. Such might as was meted out to his hands was meant for the pen rather than the sword, for piano rather than the aviator's automatic. But in spite of the restrictions which nature and his own life had placed upon him, d'Annunzio as poet has become the most potent personality in the world to-day.

"When the psychologically minded consider the recent deeds of the decadent poet they are forced to the conclusion that no substantial change has come about in the heart of the man who had used his Italy as a place of poetry, as a bank where he ran up the great debt which expatriated him. From flights of fancy in verse he took to tail-spins and nose-dives in the thin air. In place of the laurel leaf he donned his gas-mask. Closing his ear to feminine applause, he opened it again to the claque of artillery.

"Unbalanced in his erotic emotions, he found his poise at Alpine heights in the air. The rhymes and plots which his talents could control in the Word gave place to the larger story of Italian destiny. In all this, however, there has been the expansion of aesthetic personality rather than the redemption of the heart, and he who was a decadent in the days of Duse is still the decadent when the love of Italy is to be won. The deeds which he performs are not those of soldier or statesman; they are the spectacular acts of a man who plays his interesting game upon a larger field of action. The extravagances of poetry were but introductory to this recent extravaganza of patriotism. In the future, perhaps, the excessive phase of patriotism may be called, not Chauvinistic, but d'Annunciotic.

"The most obvious factor in the life of this amiable monster is what is known as decadence in art, a type of composition for which our own Edgar Allan Poe was largely responsible, although there is quite a difference from Poe in the Bronx to d'Annunzio in Fiume. D'Annunzio has been a double decadent; that is, he has combined the artistic decadence of Baudelaire and his morbidness with the anti-social decadence of Maurice Barres. Here he has retreated to the tangled depths of his perverted nature; there he has set himself in opposition to society with its laws. D'Annunzio's aesthetic delight in the sorrows of the beautiful Eleonora, whose most private confessions gave him fine stuff for a book, was but an example of the decadent motto, 'Be beautiful, but be sad.'

"Perhaps it was the woman-sadness of his Italy which aroused his love for the land. To his Satanic sweetness toward woman d'Annunzio added the whim of abandoning poetry for the sake of manufacturing some synthetic perfume of exotic fragrance, for it is a singular fact among decadents that the sense of smell plays an extraordinary part in the mentality and sensuality of the poet. To these light plays with souls and perfumes d'Annunzio added what was probably a sincere desire for annihilation, a 'homesickness for the mighty Nothingness.' His end was to come, so he thought, when, blown to ten thousand pieces, he was to launch himself into the Infinite, a method of annihilation suggested, of course, by Empedocles, but with the modern improvements of d'Annunzio.

"The special case of d'Annunzio brings up a long-mooted question concerning the difference between and the respective merits of Cherubim and Seraphim, of the Sons of Mary and the Sons of Martha, the Men of Word and Men of Deed. The competition between intellect and will, the strife between the sensory and motor portions of the brain has been made a classic by Don Quixote and Hamlet, has been elaborated by Goethe and Voltaire, has been pictured most tragically in the novels of Flaubert and Turgenieff. The man of culture is unfit for conquest, the doer for his part can never be the thinker; such has been the psychological indictment. Has d'Annunzio brought to a head a question suggested by the modest activities of intellectuals in the past? Has he made necessary the revision of psychology so that the future study of the mind shall see in the workings of the brain the co-operation between functions of thinking and willing? Has Efficiency in education begun to close the gap which stands between Word and Deed, Thought and Act? These are questions which only the future can answer.

"As far as d'Annunzio is concerned, it must not be forgotten that his acts of war have been little more than the deeds of the decadent plus. His patriotic speeches have a chance to ventilate his sumptuous style in the open. His flight over Vienna, where he dropped rhetorical pamphlets in place of bombs, showed that he had not indulged in what the Italians call 'sacrifizio dell'intelleto.' His deed of baring his breast before General Pittaluga outside the gates of Fiume is a typical act of this literary Pegasus in new harness.

"In his brain, Italy is a mood such as a woman might suggest, while Fiume is a dance which cannot last forever."

Three Very Interesting Studies by Olaf Gulbransson, in Which the Gifted Cartoonist's Pen Has Caught the Exaggerated Emotionalism Which Made Duse an Easy Prey for d'Annunzio's Wiles

Gabriele d'Annunzio, Whose "Vampirizing" Influence Upon Women Is So Peculiar

Ida Rubinstein—a Profound Contrast to the Sorrowful Introspective Face of Duse Opposite. Rubinstein, Though Treated as Badly by the Poet as the Great Italian, Had Will Enough to Throw Aside His Influence and to Make Her Own Way. The Present Season in Paris Marks Her Greatest Triumph.